letters

"A MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE"

To THE EDITOR:

In his speech to the American Historical Association as adapted for the Magazine ("The Jigsaw Puzzle of History," Jan. 24), Prof. John P. Roche outlines the difficulties in piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of current history from the sometimes dissimilar recollections of White House intimates and Presidential contemporaries.

The puzzle probably never can be completed if historians stick solely to their colleagues' memoirs and fail to go to original sources.

Professor Roche seems to accept as fact Pierre Salinger's version of my interview with President Kennedy in September, 1963. The former White House news secretary said that we edited the interview to make Kennedy appear far harsher on Vietnam's President Diem than he really intended.

Salinger, disagreeing with other White House memoirs, suggested that Kennedy had not intended publicly to pull the rug out from under the Saigon dictator with that broadcast. The facts don't sustain Salinger's version.

To support his thesis he claimed we edited out a portion of the interview wherein President Kennedy allegedly stated his "respect and sympathy for Diem."

Kennedy did say, "I admire what the President has done," as a preface for a hope that Diem would improve his relationship with the people. This was cut because the substantive matter was repeated elsewhere in the edited version.

There were no other complimentary phrases that would take the sting out of President Kennedy's words and, although this is subjective, from the tone of his remarks I certainly don't believe he intended any.

At any rate, Professor Roche might have found the missing piece to his puzzle if he had asked to see the full unedited and the edited transcripts of the Kennedy interview, on file here at CBS News.

Just one final point: Professor Roche states that "It is inconceivable that a network would edit an interview with the President without going over the cuts with the White House," and he quotes Salinger as saying this was "one of those things that fell through the slats when the President was out of town."

Mr. Salinger knows, if Professor Roche does not, that there never was any question of submitting to the President either the questions to be asked in the interview or the edited version to be shown on the air.

CBS News has had a longstanding policy that it does neither for anyone, including the President. We attempt to be journalists, not an arm of anyone's policy, least of all the Government's or the President's.

This nonpartisan reporting is the stuff that fills out history's jigsaw puzzle.

WALTER CRONKITE,
CBS News.
New York.

The author replies: "First, a cheer for Walter Cronkite who has made my essential point (that there are pieces of paper) better than I did. I went beyond my brief in suggesting that the Salinger version was correct, and Cronkite has rightly picked me up on this logical transgression. I hope he will send me the edited and unedited versions so I can make an independent assessment of the merits.

"Second, I am appalled that Cronkite would suggest that a Presidential interview could be edited by a network with no reference back to the White House. This is not a question of censorship, but a public policy. Without suggesting that the President should have the right to cut out portions he is unhappy with, he should certainly insure that other men's cuts have not twisted his meaning or be prepared for trouble if they have.

"Whatever the procedures under the Kennedy Administration may have been, the Johnson White House insisted on the right of reasonable consultations, particularly in areas of national security. This was unofficial, it was quite proper, and to my knowledge no network refused to cooperate."

TWO SIDES

To THE EDITOR:

In my article, "Race Relations Is Their Business," which appeared in the Magazine of Oct. 25, 1970, I wrote

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